

North Branch of the **Chicago River**

Open Space (Green Infrastructure) Plan

Green Infrastructure: *The natural resources that help maintain the health, safety and ambience of a community in similar fashion to the built environment, and that serve to protect the economic status, health and welfare of all within the community.*

Prepared by:

Futurity, Inc.

David Bier, *Principal*

Jessica Smith, *GIS and Information Management Specialist*

Stephen F. Christy, Jr., *Landscape Architect*

In cooperation with the project team:

The Friends of the Chicago River

John Quail, *Director of Watershed Programs (Project Manager)*

Kelly Krueger, *Watershed Assistant*

David Ramsey, *Director of Watershed Programs*

Perry Rech, *Director of Watershed Programs and General Counsel*

Lake County Storm Water Management Commission

Patricia Werner, *AICP, CFM Watershed Planner (Project Manager)*

Sean Wiedel, *CFM Watershed Planner*

Jeff Laramy, *GIS Specialist/Computer Support*

Prepared for:

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Foreward

In 1996, the Friends of Chicago River and the Lake County Stormwater Management Commission convened a group of stakeholders to begin management planning for the North Branch Chicago River watershed. These stakeholders formed the North Branch Planning Committee, which is still vibrant and active almost 10 years later. One of the first insights of the planning committee was that in order to be successful in improving watershed conditions, a coordinated effort among the many political jurisdictions, businesses, conservation organizations and residents was necessary. To that end, over the past 10 years, members of the planning committee have promoted, supported, sponsored and personally implemented more than thirty-five in-the-ground projects located throughout the watershed. These projects apply best management practices to improve conditions of the land and river in the watershed.

Chronic flood damage, poor water quality, and the loss of wetlands and other high quality natural resources to development in the North Branch watershed prompted the development of the comprehensive watershed protection and improvement plan (watershed management plan) — which the planning team and committee completed in 2000. The goals, objectives and action steps recommended in the watershed plan led to the large number of best management practice projects implemented in the watershed — and in the development of this open space plan.

It is a crucial time for preserving open space in the North Branch, with only 28% of the watershed still remaining as open land and demographic projections predicting considerable population growth through the year 2020. It took three years and the input of many partners to create the open space plan — which reflects the story of the watershed through changes in land use over the years — and provides a path for action to protect the health and character of the watershed by preserving open space.

The intent of the open space plan is to identify high quality natural resources that should be preserved for their ecological value, and to identify open lands suitable for watershed improvement projects that should also be preserved. A comprehensive inventory and prioritization of open and partially open parcels throughout the watershed included in chapter 2 of this plan identifies these important open space areas. Once identified, the green infrastructure action plan in chapter 4 provides direction for stakeholders on actions they can undertake to preserve open space in their respective jurisdictions to meet the plan goal of preserving 25% of the watershed as open space.

In addition to providing direction for how to preserve open space, this plan also specifies how open lands can be better managed to provide greater ecological, water quality, recreation and flood damage reduction benefits. To this end, chapter 3 provides a description of best management practice tools and the action plan in chapter 4 includes recommendations for restoring and managing natural areas, floodplains and wetlands in a greenway system that also features general locations for recreational trails.

A sense of the distinctive qualities of the North Branch indicates that open spaces are important for preserving the character of the watershed. At the same time, the current forces of change provide what is in essence a “moment of opportunity” for preserving open space. Join us in seizing this moment by promoting, supporting and implementing the recommendations in this plan document.

Executive Summary

Open space has many values. It provides areas for recreation. It can be used to manage water quality and flood problems — it is the “green infrastructure” of communities. Increasingly, it is seen as an important part of the landscape restoration movement, providing habitat for native plants and animals. It also has intangible esthetic value, such as providing society with a sense of place and history. Lastly, the benefits of open space directly relate to a community’s quality of life. These, in turn, directly relate to economic sustainability and competitiveness.

Futurity, Inc. (Futurity) has prepared an open space plan for the watershed of the North Branch of the Chicago River, an area of 60,649 acres or roughly 95 square miles. This plan is an outgrowth of a 2000 report entitled North Branch of the Chicago River Watershed Assessment and Management Plan for Lake County, Illinois (Watershed Plan), prepared by the Lake County Stormwater Management Commission (SMC). The North Branch Planning Committee (planning committee) established an open space plan committee to identify open space properties that support watershed plan implementation and meet the seven goals listed below.

The goals of the open space plan are to:

- Preserve 25% of the North Branch Chicago River watershed as open space
- Reduce flood damage
- Improve water quality
- Protect high quality natural areas as open space
- Protect and enhance habitat
- Improve recreation and education opportunities in under-served areas and for a growing population
- Integrate and coordinate open space protection at the watershed scale

A parcel based inventory identified 16,962 acres of open space (open parcels). Of this 8,528 acres (14% of the watershed) are protected from development. One of the open space plan objectives calls for protecting 15,162 acres, or 25% of the watershed as open space. In order to achieve this objective, an additional 6,634 acres (out of the remaining 8,421 acres) must be protected. Of the remaining 8,421 acres, the open space plan calls for preserving an additional 5,480 acres (4,788 acres in the greenway system and 692 acres outside of the greenway system). This brings the total amount of potential preserved open space to 14,665 acres (24% of the watershed).

Additionally, 1,380 acres of partially open parcels are recommended for preservation. Of this, only 498 acres need to be preserved in order to achieve the objective of protecting 25% of the watershed (15,162 acres) as open space.

The open space plan includes numerous parcel-specific management recommendations and a regional trail and greenway system linking recommended properties into a unified whole. It also provides an array of preservation and funding options, a timetable, and a cost estimate to accomplish this.

The urgency of this plan cannot be emphasized enough. The 1990 population in the Lake County portion of the watershed is projected to increase 45% by 2020. Open space throughout the watershed will continue to be developed as this population growth occurs. Opportunities to halt further decline in water quality, mitigate flooding, and protect and promote critical natural habitat are disappearing rapidly. This plan lays out a framework of actions that are necessary to diminish the impacts of rapid urbanization on the watershed.

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Name	Agency/Organization
Adams, Tom	Mayor, Village of Green Oaks
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Flood, Rob	North Shore Sanitary District
Gravenhorst, Susan	Lake County Board, Lake County Forest Preserve District
Grill, Rebecca	Park District Highland Park
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Depke Design
 Meighan Depke, *Principal*
 848 West Eastman
 Chicago, Illinois 60622
 312-335-2199

For additional information on the open space management plan and the North Branch Chicago River watershed, contact:

Patricia S. Werner, *AICP, CFM, Watershed Planner*
 Lake County Storm Water Management Commission
 333 Peterson Road
 Libertyville, Illinois 60048
 pwerner@co.lake.il.us
 Phone: (847) 918-5269; Fax: (847) 918-9826

John Quail, *Director of Watershed Programs*
 Friends of the Chicago River
 407 South Dearborn, Suite 1580
 Chicago, Illinois 60605
 jquail@chicagoriver.org
 Phone: (312) 939-0490 x 20; Fax (312) 939-0931

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